



## WATER RESOURCES RESEARCH GRANT PROPOSAL

**Project ID:** 2006CA174B

**Title:** The Politics and Practice of Watershed Restoration: Insights from the Russian River Watershed, Northern California

**Project Type:** Research

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**Congressional District:** 44

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**Principal Investigator:** Romm, Jeff

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**Abstract:** In the last two decades, watershed restoration has dramatically increased in both popularity and practice. California has lead the way with multi-billion dollar bonds being approved by voters for environmental improvements and a plethora of public and private funding sources providing grants for restoration activities. Yet, the social and environmental outcomes of restoration remain ambiguous and critics charge that restoration has not fulfilled its promise, often relying on simplistic classification schemes that do not address dynamic watershed processes nor sources of degradation (Doyle et al., 1999; Miller and Ritter, 1996; Kondolf, 1995; Hecht, 1994). Conservation and restoration are as much about social processes as physical ones, however social factors are not subjected to the same systematic analysis as the technical ones (Blaikie, 1985). We argue that watersheds are both ecologically and socially dynamic, and that restoration that does not recognize the importance of the social context will fail to address the sources of degradation. It is only through understanding and analyzing natural resource management in an integrated manner that sustainable solutions can be found. For example, to restore a run of salmon requires not just biophysical treatments but also reconfiguring the economic

conditions and land use practices that determine the amount of silt that ends up in spawning gravel and the social relations that make up that economy (Higgs, 2003).

To explore these larger issues, we examine a case study of the Russian River watershed in Northern California, asking the following central research question: How do social relations influence the practice of watershed restoration? This research will provide an analysis of the institutional framework and political economy of restoration in the Russian River watershed in order to examine how institutional and structural forces influence the practice of watershed restoration over time. This study is particularly relevant due to several potential transformations in the management of the Russian River. The first being the relicensing of the Potter Valley Hydropower Project, which provides the Russian River with Eel River water during the summer. The second being the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's Section 7 consultations for endangered salmon fisheries within the Russian River watershed, which may be influenced by proposed changes in the ESA that dramatically reduce designated habitat for endangered Pacific salmon and steelhead. The third being the current pressure for adjudication of formal water rights in the watershed. Each of these processes could dramatically alter the context of restoration. Restoration must take into account these larger political and social shifts to provide viable treatments and alternatives.

Our main research objective is to enhance watershed management in California by improving our understanding of the coupled social - environmental causes and manifestations of watershed restoration. To do this, we integrate institutional analyses, archival research, document and literature reviews, interviews, post-project appraisals, and spatial data analysis in order to make explicit the broader webs of social relations that shape restoration and explore the consequences for different groups of people and organisms. It is our intent to evidence, rather than to explain, how and why restoration is not only an ecological activity, but also an inherently social one.

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[\*U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey\*](#)

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*Maintained by:* [\*John Schefter\*](#)

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